Retaining Athletes Through Volunteer-Based Organizations: Organizational Strategies for Surviving in Canada’s Hockey Development System in Alberta, Canada

Jonathon Edwards, University of Alberta
Marvin Washington (Advisor), University of Alberta

Club hockey organizations are the stepping stones for players wishing to advance to higher competition levels in hockey, such as the Canadian Hockey League (CHL), Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS), National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), or the National Hockey League (NHL). Players in club hockey organizations, and their parents, have the expectation that the players’ skills will be developed and that opportunities exist to possibly reach the CHL, CIS, NCAA, or NHL. While many individuals play club hockey with an aspiration to play at a higher level, there are many factors, in addition to skill, that might get in the way of a player’s continued involvement in hockey at the elite level. Some of these factors include time commitment, scholastic endeavours, school sports, the amount of ice time that a player receives, leisure pursuits such as video games, limited opportunities to advance to higher competition levels, economics (e.g., the cost of playing the sport), or politics (e.g., who a player or parent knows or does not know).

Management of club hockey organizations and governing bodies must deal with these challenges in order to retain players in the sport of hockey. Indeed, “Organizations of all sizes and types are recognizing that they are engaged in a struggle to retain talent, and are actively trying to do something about it” (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, & Graske, 2011, p. 97). Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the player retention strategies adopted by club hockey organizations in the context of Canada’s Elite Level Hockey Development System (CELHDS) in and near the city of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The specific research questions posed for this study were: What strategies do local club hockey organizations use to retain players in the Edmonton, Alberta, Canada area? and, How do the governing bodies play a role in facilitating player retention?

The term retention "refers to each athlete's choice to continue to participate" (Green, 2005, p. 236). Management, in turn, incorporate strategies "to capitalize on the identification of the most talented, retain them, and assist them to obtain the required skills to achieve high standards of performance" (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008, p. 262). To further explore player retention from the perspective of club hockey organizations and governing hockey bodies, I drew on the work of Thompson (1967, 2008), with the understanding that organizations can be subdivided according to the environment in which they operate. This means that organizations are designed so that the technical core is isolated from environmental influences or uncertainties, as means of providing stability. This means that organizations are designed so that the technical core is isolated from environmental influences or uncertainties, as means of providing stability. There were three levels to Thompson’s model: technical core, boundary spanning units, and environmental influences.

The technical core refers to the part of the system or organization that is concerned directly with the production of goods and services (Chelladurai, 2009; Thompson, 1967; 2008); within the context of this study, the technical core is understood to be the club hockey organizations. While organizations use boundary spanning units to isolate or buffer the technical core from the external environment or to stabilize the environment so that the technical core can operate efficiently (Thompson, 1967; 2008). In this study, the boundary spanning units are the governing bodies—Hockey Canada (HC), Hockey Alberta (HA), and the Edmonton Minor Hockey Association (EMHA)—that are responsible for developing, imposing, and monitoring regulations that directly affect the activities of club hockey organizations.

A case study methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003) was employed to examine the research questions. Face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted with 13 executive board members and employees of club hockey organizations, and governing hockey bodies. These individuals have substantial knowledge about the strategies implemented and developed by the different organizations. Secondary sources of data originated from the organization’s websites. Interviews were transcribed and themes that emerged from the interviews and secondary
Data sources were identified as strategies. These strategies were analyzed and coded based on inductive reasoning through an interpretativism approach.

Data analysis revealed Player Development, Facility Ownership, Performance Driven Outcomes, and Communication are the strategies used in player retention by the club hockey organizations. These strategies are understood to be cognitive actions by management of club hockey organizations to achieve a specific goal for the organization. The second research question was answered using the model and principles developed by Thompson (1967). Boundary spanning units (i.e., HC, HA, and the EMHA) impose residential boundary regulations on players to restrict player mobility and assist in competitive balance. Ultimately, these boundaries help to stabilize the club hockey organizations’ player participation numbers and ensure that there are players to choose from in the Bantam age category (12 to 14 years old) at the club hockey level of competition. Thus, rather than recruiting players, management of club hockey organizations endeavour to retain players to compete at the elite level.

As the complexity of sport systems increases with city population growth, economic conditions, or the success of other sport organizations within or outside the system, an understanding of various sport systems can be an integral part of sport managers’ athlete/player retention strategies. Through this research, the CELHDS and the organizations involved in this system are an example of how a system is able to buffer external fluctuations found within the environment. Thus, sport managers need to determine, develop, and implement different athlete/player retention strategies to ensure their organizations’ stability within a sport system. In addition, governing bodies must determine means of ensuring that participation rates remain high at the foundation of the system, so that a large talent pool is maintained from which elite level athletes can be drawn. Such strategies essentially stabilize the technical core of a system at the elite level and become contingent elements in ensuring the survival of volunteer based sport organization operating within a complex sport system, such as CELHDS.